

VZCZCXR07258

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DE RUEHB #0478 0920713
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
R 020713Z APR 09
FM AMEMBASSY BRUSSELS
TO RUEHZL/EUROPEAN POLITICAL COLLECTIVE
RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 8791

UNCLAS BRUSSELS 000478

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [BE](#)

SUBJECT: PM VAN ROMPUY OUTLINES HIS GOVERNMENT'S PRIORITIES

¶1. (U) Summary: Belgian Prime Minister Herman Van Rompuy, in a series of interviews with the Belgian press over the March 28-29, 2009 weekend, outlined his government's five top priorities. These priorities are: balancing the budget, the regularization of immigration, whether to phase out nuclear energy, an institutional reform agreement, and the resolution of the Brussels-Halle-Vilvoorde conflict. However, PM Van Rompuy stresses that progress will not be made on many of these issues until after the regional and European elections on June 7. End Summary.

¶2. (U) The prime minister's first priority is balancing the budget. Known for significantly reducing the nation's deficit as Minister of Budget in the Jean-Luc Dehaene government, many see Van Rompuy's experience as a great asset to Belgium in the current economic crisis. His six-year management of the budget, starting in 1993, is credited with giving Belgium the ability to adopt the euro. But with the Socialists rejecting austerity measures to reduce spending, and conservatives saying no to raising taxes to increase revenues, Van Rompuy deftly dodged conflict by revealing that he has ideas for increasing government revenues without raising taxes, yet without offering examples.

¶3. (U) His second priority is to establish a humanitarian solution to immigration. While Belgium has maintained an official ban on immigration since 1974, it continues to be a country of immigration, mostly illegal. The growing "sans papiers" movement and population is driving the government to seek a solution. However, differences of how to resolve the issue have stalled the process, at least until the regional and European elections set for June 7. During the March 21-22 weekend, Prime Minister Van Rompuy met with majority leaders and Minister of Integration and Asylum Annemie Turtelboom to discuss the issue. There were no breakthroughs. Minister Turtelboom announced the following weekend that she intends to allow families with children, who meet specific requirements, to stay in Belgium for one year as part of a provisional regularization plan. While supported by many as a temporary resolution for a few thousand of the most sympathetic cases, others allege that it is either not enough or too much. However, this reluctance is not likely to seriously impede the talks.

¶4. (U) Third is whether to reverse the decision to phase out nuclear energy in Belgium. There are seven nuclear reactors in Belgium, generating two-thirds of its energy. However, in 2003, an earlier government in which a green party was included in the governing coalition passed a law prohibiting the construction of additional nuclear power plants, and mandating the closure of the seven reactors from 2014 to 2025. This timeframe has created a sense of urgency which is not lost on Van Rompuy. "It is a decision we will need to make without delay," he said, although adding, "after June 7."

¶5. (U) The institutional reforms process, which has been particularly contentious, is fourth on the list. Flemish demands for greater regional autonomy have threatened the integrity of the country. On July 15, 2008, when the

self-imposed institutional reforms deadline arrived without a deal, the then-Prime Minister Yves Leterme tendered his resignation, which was rejected by King Albert II. Most recently, in January 2009, the institutional talks again collapsed. With the proximity of the June 7 elections, Flemish leaders wanted to appease their constituency with concessions from the Walloons, while francophone politicians wanted just the opposite.

¶6. (U) As a specific example of regional controversy, the fifth and final priority outlined by PM Van Rompuy is the Brussels-Halle-Vilvoorde conflict. Due to the increasing francophone presence in the Flemish suburbs surrounding the Brussels-Capital Region, the Capital Region and the Halle-Vilvoorde district have been combined into a special electoral district. However, the Flemish want to re-divide these two districts to conform to constitutionally specified principles, a move that the francophone community fears will disenfranchise them from having a political voice.

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